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# A Proposal of a Cinematography for a Fictional Documentary on the Semiological Manifestation of a Place called Death Valley

Emmett Barton

05 December, 2006

This is a documentary. On its surface shines the patina of a place called “Death Valley.” Beneath this is the consciousness of a landscape. On the surface of this proposal is a set of instructions dictating the cinematography of a fictional documentary. A layer below is found to contain a theory on representative/symbolic filmmaking. Thus much of this text supposes the completion of narrative ephemera and the restriction of visual errata. Supposedly, here is how we should open:

## Visual

Extreme low shot of the dawn sky. In the frame to either the right is the rising wall of a mountain, the wall of the Valley. The camera literally looks 180 degrees upwards from the ground.

Pan down: this is a time-lapse pan. As the horizon breaches the bottom of the frame, so does the Valley see the passage of several days. When the camera has panned 60 degrees downward, the time is perhaps around noon. Waves of heat dance over the cracked desert floor.

## Audio

[illegible]

To begin with, in a documentary about Death Valley from the perspective of Death Valley, there is lack. A marriage, often discordant, between sound and image will assert associations between *something* and *nothing*. The conception, however, of *nothing* is proved abortive. “Death” and “Valley” wed in a paradox of physical matter: if a valley is a low point, a depression, between more altitudinous geography—awaiting fulfillment—how can it be filled with “death?” Like darkness, an absence of life, *nothingness* is crystallized in language and given an improbable weight. Already, emotions veil the space, a relief is made in one continuous draping attitude towards *nothing*. *Something* is formed out of the non-thing. Of what substance this non-thing? All, obviously, all that is un-man, un-human, is a non-thing: all essence of rock and bladey

grass and craggy weed and scratching air-breathing things denied identity of their own. The viscous veiling material of mythology drapes over the teeming existence of Death Valley's nothingness, its live death, and with the power of a word, smothers the landscape in a bas relief of conceivable nothingness only to be empirically disambiguated later through the vicissitudes of science and tourism.

Lack is a product of systemized un-knowledge. The undoing of mythology by science and consumerism is a Pyrrhic victory: on the one hand, these are mythologies in their own right. On the other hand, even the camera which records the landscape confines the moment to a measured time and frame. Thus the approach of a documentary about Death Valley is fraught with the suffocating weight of perception. However, as a medium of simulacrum, the audio and visual lens should never pretend to deny itself but instead acknowledge the subjectivity of its objective of objectiveness and thereby present its material through the best and only possible means: individual perception.

Within is convoluted labyrinth of reproach, a film about Death Valley from the perspective of the Valley necessitates a metaphysical connection between the landscape and the mechanical apparatus. As it is difficult to argue the value or authenticity of a creation of the hand against a creation of the forces of nature (which will hereby be associated with a perpetual kinetic energy and nothing more), the conceptual or metaphysical meshing of camera and environment will suffice to describe a narrative about Death Valley as a living ecosystem and the Camera as a *thing* living by extension through the kinetics of nature and the will of human beings. However, this will be presented subtly. The purpose of a system for accepting the existence of the camera as a corporeal object is only to acknowledge the interconnectedness of systems in order to bridge gaps between the *something* of everything outside of Death Valley and the *nothing* of everything inside. Thus the focus of the images and audio will be Death Valley's *awareness* of its signification first by human mythological systems and later by technological systems such as the Camera. Filling the Valley with meaning and fighting against lack of meaning is the dialectical focus of this documentary process. This process, on a philosophical level, strives to deliver a conscious and aware perspective. As a result, the camera may at times appear objective, but it is nothing of the sort.

Documenting Death Valley and human beings is by default a fictionalization resulting from the rationalization of the irascible energy of a non-human thing. The essence of this fiction is, as such: even though the proposed documentary is about Death Valley, it is ultimately about Us. However, in this ersatz anatomy of ourselves through the false omniscience of the Valley Camera, the images and thoughts confined within the frame (which becomes both spatially, temporally, and philosophically confining) are in constant danger of dressing themselves in the patina of myth, legend, and personal interpretation. This deconstructive ability garnered by the ambiguous nature of the project is built into the system: it is the resistance inherent in that perpetual kinetic energy, of which we are a part, but cannot control. After all, the only thing that gives us power over nature is our ability to actively assign relations between signs and signifiers, objects—conceptual or corporeal—and meanings through language.

The true difficulty in organizing this documentary will be the forming of the images into a comprehensive cinematic language where the images alone formulate a concept held with grammatical cohesion. In this way, the images will communicate in relation to each other independent of the audio. The sound, for that matter, will be a

bricolage of Death Valley atmosphere, human psychological Foley, and the precise mechanical sounds of the Camera-life itself.

The perspective taken by the camera in the opening scene begins the film at the Valley floor, a point of lower power, emphasizing the lowest point in North American elevation and the proposed ideological difference in this perceived *nothingness*. This point of view serves as the narrative base, and all other points of view are compared to it. Perhaps, in showing the affect of nuclear testing and nuclear waste disposal in and on near-by ecosystems, such as the Yucca Mountain High Level Nuclear Waste Repository, such images would describe the interconnectedness of these ecological systems as well as the different perceptions of space and distance between humans and environments.

### Visual

Satellite photography of Yucca Mountain and surrounding area, including Death Valley less than 30 miles to the south. Here, the camera hovers 100 miles above Earth. (This sequence is precluded with the close observation of evaporation of water into the air, thus our perspective follows the transition of moisture into rain, allowing us this perspective).  
 .....  
 Following the sound transition, as the roaring reaches a peak, the point of view cuts to a 90 degree shot of the desert floor again. Rain drops. Here follows a structured introduction to the massive Tunnel Boring Machine used to drill 15-meter wide diameters through the rock. This is the source of the sound.

### Audio

A low, almost imperceptible rumbling of thunder. Here the sound is again dominated by the steady, knowing, ticking of the camera's machinations. Quietly, a low, steady hum enters. This rises to a roaring, grinding machine clamor.  
 .....  
 As the images hone in on the Tunnel Boring Machine, the sound of this machine begins to become less droning and more atmospheric, wavering between atonal and harmonic, sweet and bitter; it makes music to the rock.

The Law of Conservation of Mass states that matter can neither be created nor destroyed. Thus, even though it appears that the storage of nuclear waste or the testing of nuclear weapons in nearby spaces is altering nature of the environment, it should be understood that the symbolic function of that space had to be altered first. And so are meanings shifted around, matter moved from place to place, and human beings ignorantly deliberating forever towards *nothing* awaiting fulfillment with *something*. Within the dogma of this manifest towards destiny, no creation of destruction better substantiates this drive than the nuclear weapon. Just as in the above scene, where Yucca Mountain is connected with Death Valley in a geographic/ecological context of natural familiars, so

should the manifesting of destiny through crusading dogma be connected through the visual medium's structural ideology. In this scene, the detonation of a nuclear device should be juxtaposed against the construction of a shopping mall. Here:

### **Visual**

The camera rests on the valley floor. As the low, buzzing, rumbling sound seems to increase slightly, the horizon explodes in the sudden blinding flash of a thermonuclear detonation. The detonation flash lasts but a second and recedes to reveal the blossoming mushroom cloud. A wave of dust and debris briefly washes over the Valley Camera. As the cloud reaches the apex of its expansion, a slow fade into the construction sequence begins. The Camera does not change position within three-dimensional space; around it a shopping mall is being built in fast time lapse.

### **Audio**

The valley ambience fades into a low rumbling; this sound should be mixed to seem to be in the far distance in front of the Valley Camera. At the moment of detonation, there is nothing but the mechanical clatter of the Camera-body. As the flash of detonation fades and the mushroom cloud reaches the apex of its bloom, the Camera sound is slowly overtaken by the sundry sounds of construction: men barking orders, hydraulic machines moving heavy materials, hammers pounding nails, diesel engines plaintively roaring. Behind this montage of sound, however, is a dominant machine theme: the racing wail of a taxed engine. This theme is dynamically colored with the aural minutiae of the internal combustion engine: clacking valves, whirring belts, boiling fluids, the hiss of hot oil dropping into a waiting pan.

By juxtaposing the most destructive force known to human beings against our most lauded merits of creation, a connection of opposites and similars is made through the narrative of the visual medium. Creation and destruction in the context of the Law of Conservation of Mass state interact in the text so that the destructive power of the nuclear weapon is understood to be the product of a creative force and the construction of the mall is possible from the necessary deconstruction of natural materials (sand, stone, metal, water, oil, biomass, land area). This statement of the interconnectiveness of systems, however, is not without cultural commentary. Such proposed editing of sound and image produces a negative effect. Our associations with nuclear weapons are an ambivalent hydra of wonder, fear, and rejection. However, when presented with a shopping mall, one's attitude divides along a polar attitude: one either sees them as signs of a functioning economy or as signs of a degrading consumer society. This proposed documentary's representative position presumes the latter.

The above text is a hypothetical set of instructions for the envisioning and application of a metaphysical documentary. However, this Gedankenexperiment should present a conclusion. In order for this project to assume a form that is meta-physical, its conclusion should end with a beginning. Thus, it should be proposed that the physical

medium of this fictional documentary's distribution should be digital video disc. Encoded on this disc should be a list of instructions in the machine language dictating the DVD player to begin the disc over at the beginning. There shall be no menu, no chapter, no ability to fast-forward, rewind, pause. Stop and play will be the only means of interaction with this visual/aural text. Here, then, is that final scene:

### Visual

A time lapse shot of the sky from the Valley floor. Several days pass. The Camera starts 90 degrees at the horizon and pans up at a seemingly geological pace 90 more degrees to rest 180 degrees from the horizon. In the sky, it is dawn. To the left of the frame is a rising mountain side: the side of the valley.

### Audio

The only sound to be heard during the Camera's time-lapse pan in the clattering breath of its machine-life. As it slows in its ascent, so too does its sound fade to allow the dead life of the Valley fill the aural landscape.

In order to assert its ideological argument with any shred of verisimilitude, the film cannot present itself as a means to an *end*. And thus, the lack of an "end" in the "narrative" of the film leaves the cinematographic text open to interpretation as a mean to a *creation*: something forever running in a system that is, inherently by-itself, encapsulated in the medium, yet forever un-*ending*. Without the suture to the false narrative, the film makes an attempt to *not* define the *nothing* of the "death" "valley" space recorded by the metaphysical camera as a concrete *something*. Providing the audience with solid evidence would be self defeating.

Cinema is trapped forever within the soul-stealing witchcraft of memory. Because of this, the recording of the Valley by the Camera "creates" the Valley, as well as preserves it. An intent to end the film places human-chronological constraints on a landscape that defies our sophomoric spatial quantifying of time. Thus, in doing so, the place called Death Valley would be magically slain. The interpretive preservation of Death Valley as a landscape scarred with society's semiological sigils necessitates a repetitive, unending, symbolical demarcation of landscape, as well as a cleansing, "time"less process by which these boundaries are occulted and forgotten.